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ABSTRACT

The need for a comprehensive plan--an overall pattern of development--for rural counties is discussed in this paper. The planning is done by a representative body with the authority to make detailed studies, to draft and recommend long-range comprehensive plans and specific plans, and to suggest measures to implement the plans. The 3 steps for preparing a comprehensive plan are (1) deciding on overall goals; (2) gathering facts about what the county has now, its resources, potentials, and problems; and (3) making a comprehensive plan that shows how the county can use what it has to achieve its goals. To put the plan into effect requires adoption of the plan by the county governing body, an action program directed by the county government, cooperation of private developers, and public support. Several suggestions are made in the paper to assist the individual who is interested in starting a comprehensive plan in his own county. (PS)

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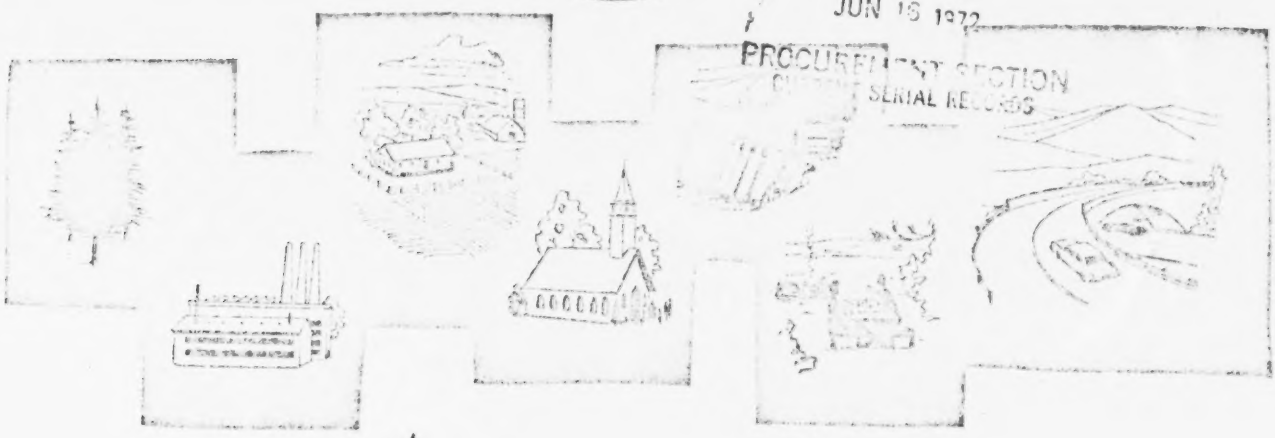

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COMPREHENSIVE PLANS FOR IMPROVING RURAL COUNTIES

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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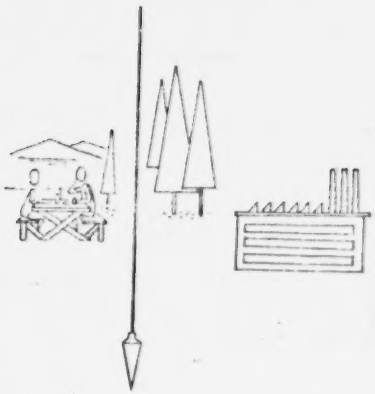

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For many rural counties, now is the time to prepare a comprehensive plan—an overall pattern of development.

A comprehensive plan shows how a county can best use what it has, to become the kind of place it wants to be. It specifies how present and future improvements and uses of land and other natural resources should be related. It is a guide to both public and private development activities.

WHY A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

Comprehensive planning is the basic first part of the planning-zoning process. This process, long used by cities, is the main public way citizens can guide the growth of their community.

For any rural county, comprehensive planning is an investment in the future. Along with zoning it is insurance against problems created by unplanned growth.

For a rural county that has a growing city, comprehensive planning is needed immediately. If begun in time the planning-zoning process can guide and control suburban growth, preventing wasteful, ugly haphazard urban sprawl.

Unguided urban invasion of a rural county wastes tax dollars, farmland, and water. It fosters land-use conflicts—such as those that often arise when residences and business establishments are located next to each other. Often it impairs farming. This in turn impairs local industries and businesses that serve farmers.

For an economically depressed rural county comprehensive planning may be the first step toward better times.

It may show, for example, how the county can help itself by capitalizing on its industrial potential. Or it may suggest how income-producing recreation, tourism, agriculture, or service-type enterprises can be developed.

In addition, the county that has a plan for its future development is looked on more favorably by industry and business seeking new locations. And often it can participate more effectively in State and Federal development or community-aid programs.

Planning for a county, like planning for an individual or a family, is nothing more than the wise use of foresight. Experienced planners foresee future problems, needs, and objectives, and chart their courses years in advance.

WHO DOES THE PLANNING?

A planning body—usually called a board—prepares the comprehensive plan.

The creation of a planning board that can function officially starts with State legislation. Such a board cannot be created unless the State legislature grants to the county government or to a regional planning agency the authority to undertake a planning program and to spend public funds for planning purposes.

Next step is the establishment of the planning board in the way set forth by the law.

The planning board should be able to get the views of a cross section of the population. If the members of the board do not themselves represent all major population segments—such as businessmen, farmers, housewives, and so on—the board should appoint and work closely with an advisory committee that is representative. The plan will work best if it is made and understood by the people who will be living with it.

Because community planning requires specialized technical skill and experience, the board usually employs a professional planning consultant or staff to help with the task.

The planning board has no powers except those delegated to it by the State legislature and the local governing bodies concerned. The board should be delegated the authority to make detailed studies, to draft and recommend long-range comprehensive plans and specific plans, and to suggest measures to implement the plans.

HOW A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN IS PREPARED

Comprehensive planning is a three-step job. The steps are:

1. Deciding on overall goals.
2. Gathering facts about what the county has now—its resources, potentials, and problems.
3. Making a comprehensive plan that shows how the county can use what it has to achieve its goals.

This plan usually has three closely related parts, each of which is made up of numerous specific plans and proposals. Part 1 deals with social, economic, and civic improvements, part 2 with land use, and part 3 with use of natural resources.

Step 1. Deciding on Goals

The planning board's first big job is to decide on a set of clear-cut objectives of the comprehensive plan. What is it to accomplish and why?

In general, these objectives will be to preserve what is best in the county, to develop what is good, and to oppose what is undesirable.

Specifically, they may include some or all of the following goals.

- Increasing industrial production and employment.
- Reserving the best agricultural areas for farming.
- Maintaining the agricultural base and related processing and servicing activities.
- Protecting historical and scenic values and natural beauty.
- Conserving and developing natural resources.
- Guiding marginal farmland and wasteland into economic forest and recreational uses.
- Saving stream valleys, wooded areas, and steep slopes for parks and open spaces.
- Developing attractive residential areas.
- Raising educational levels. Providing adequate, safely located schools.
- Improving transportation.
- Providing convenient shopping areas.
- Preventing scattered, sprawling, haphazard suburban development and its ugly, costly, wasteful aftermath.
- Getting the most out of each tax dollar by avoiding duplication of facilities—such as roads, water mains, and sewer

lines—and putting government on a sound financial basis.

Step 2. Gathering Facts

Facts are the stuff of planning. Comprehensive planning for a county requires many.

The planning board decides what facts it needs, then collects them. Some may be available from local civic organizations or from State or Federal Government agencies. To obtain others it may be necessary to make special studies or surveys.

The kinds of facts and other help that Government agencies can supply are outlined in the three publications listed on page 10.

Listed below are the kinds of facts that have been used by communities in preparing comprehensive plans. The list is a sampling only. Because communities differ, the facts that are pertinent to planning vary. Any one planning board will not require all the items listed and may need others not listed.

General Facts

Accurate base map of county and of any surrounding territory considered in planning.

Aerial photograph of the county.

Contour map of the county.

Geologic map showing (1) mineral resources, including sand, gravel, valuable clays, and rock; (2) rock outcroppings and landslide potentials; and (3) areas subject to flooding.

Climatic data: Temperature range, prevailing winds, humidity, rainfall, and storms.

Physical and Social Facts

Existing improvements

Maps and reports of location, condition, and adequacy of the following public and semipublic improvements:

- *Transportation facilities*: Waterways, railroads, highways, roads, streets, truck and bus lines, airports and commercial airlines.
- *Public service facilities*: Hydroelectric and steam plants, power lines, gas plants and mains, sewage treatment plants, sanitary and storm sewers, telephone properties.
- *Government buildings and facilities*: Town halls, courthouse, other local, State, or Federal Government buildings and institutions.

Present economic base

Map showing location of industrial and business areas.

Studies of economic base of present industries.

Reports on trade and market areas in the county and in adjoining areas.

Data on employment, wage rates, and income.

Reports on economic contribution of farming and ranching and related processing industries, supply and service firms, and employment.

Reports on economic contribution of forestry, forest industries, and related jobs.

People and facilities for their use

Reports of population, growth, projections, characteristics, and distribution.

Data on educational levels and technical and trade skills.

Reports on location, capacity, and age of public and private schools.

Reports on school enrollment—present and projected.

Map showing school bus routes.

Map showing 1-family, 2-family, and multifamily housing areas.

Reports on condition of housing, housing supply, and rate of housing construction.

Map showing location of parks, playgrounds, and other recreational facilities. Reports of condition and adequacy of these facilities.

Location, capacity, and other information about public housing and welfare facilities.

Government and finance

Studies of local taxation and cost of public services, by type of land-use district.

Bonded indebtedness and important public improvements under construction.

Copies of existing plans for physical development in the area by public agencies—local, regional, State, and Federal.

Copies of any general county plans, subdivision and sanitary codes, and zoning ordinance and zoning maps.

Present Land Uses

In planning for future use of land, it is necessary to divide the community into districts for different kinds of land uses. For this, planners will need detailed information of the kind listed below about present land uses. They will also use some of the facts on natural resources listed in the next section.

Map showing areas now used for industry, residences, farming, forestry, and recreation.

Map showing publicly owned land—local, State, and Federal.

Map showing private land ownership.

Map showing farm and nonfarm residences.

Natural Resources Data

Soil resource data

Generalized and detailed soil maps; land-use capability maps, showing how soils are rated for agricultural uses.

Soil survey interpretation maps—showing suitability of land areas for business and industrial sites, schools, and institutional sites, roads, homesites, and disposal of sewage.

Map showing location of damsites, ponds, flood plains, athletic fields, and recreation areas of all kinds.

Sources of sand, gravel, industrial clays, and materials for fill or topsoil.

Urban-suburban conservation problems

Extent of sheet and gully erosion on neglected undeveloped tracts and roadside cuts and ditches.

Amount of aggravated soil erosion during construction stages of subdivision development and street and road building.

Extent of sedimentation of drainage channels and destruction of fish and wildlife as a result of pollution of streams and lakes by eroded soils or by other pollutants.

Evaluation of agricultural resources

Map showing productive and submarginal farming areas. Data on farmland, land improvement, and agricultural production.

Other data on such subjects as agricultural problems in suburbia; water resources; recreation resources; forestry, fish, and wildlife resources; mined area restoration.

Step 3. Making the Plan

Using the assembled information, the planning board outlines specific plans for achieving the goals decided on. These plans make up the comprehensive plan. Below is a sampling of typical plans that may be included in comprehensive plans for rural counties.

In planning, the board makes sure that each plan proposed is financially possible and in harmony with all related plans.

Normally the comprehensive plan is put together for presentation to the county governing body in a report that includes a series of maps and proposals. One map usually shows all the proposals in their relation to one another.

To be successful, a comprehensive plan must be understood and supported by the people of the county. The board will do well to report to the people of the county from time to time as the comprehensive plan takes shape, and to invite good planning ideas from them at public hearings. One way the board can get public participation in planning is to work with local advisory committees throughout the county.

Economic, Civic, and Social Improvement Plans

The nature of these improvements and the location of some of them can strongly influence the direction and pattern of the county's growth.

Transportation and public services

- Maps showing location of proposed highways and roads—Federal, State, and local.
- Plans for navigation and harbor improvement.
- Plans for reducing number of rail-grade crossings and for providing adequate protection at remaining crossings.
- Plans for provision of off-street parking space.
- Maps showing location of proposed sewage treatment plants, sewer mains, and other sewer facilities.
- Maps showing location of proposed storm sewers and channels.

- Maps showing location of such proposed public service facilities as water, power, gas, and telephone lines.
- Plans for providing additional fire and police facilities and other protective services as needed.

Economic base

- Plans for fostering business, industrial, and agricultural development, as needed to obtain a balanced economic base.
- Plans for expanding the tourist trade.
- Reports on market trends and changes in shopping habits.
- Proposals for use of undeveloped resources of all kinds available in the area.

Educational, cultural, and housing facilities

- Maps and reports on proposed schools—including vocational and trade schools.
- Programs for raising educational levels and for increasing technical skills.
- Proposals for future public housing and health and welfare facilities. Maps of proposed 1-family, 2-family, and multifamily housing.
- Maps and reports of proposed parks, playgrounds, and other recreational and cultural facilities.

Government and finance

- Reports of studies of trends in the community and area.
- Long-range program of public improvements and related financial program.
- Reports of studies of tax measures designed to encourage allocation of land and other resources for their most suitable uses.
- Proposal for changes in local government organization for economy and efficiency.

Land-Use Plans

Plans for use of land outline what thoughtful men have suggested as the most appropriate use of the various land areas in the community. These plans are advisory only. They do not zone the land; but they can be used as a basis for zoning.

- Map showing desirable future land-use pattern, indicating areas suitable for industry, business, homes, farming, forests, recreation, and other uses.
- Plans for reserving land needed in the future for new industry, shopping centers, schools, parks, and other public facilities.
- Plans for acquiring development rights or scenic easements in strategic areas for open space. These plans include reserving for this use the steepest slopes, natural drainage areas, floodways, and other unusual land forms.
- Map indicating location of proposed zones for various uses—agricultural, residential, commercial, industrial, forestry, recreational, flood plain, and other.

Natural-Resource-Use Plans and Proposals

Countrywide and regional plans for wise use of natural resources take into account both urban and rural interests. They include measures for preventing soil erosion when roads and subdivisions are built, for fostering and protecting agriculture, and for getting the greatest possible benefits from water, forests, and other materials supplied by nature.

Soil and water conservation in urban and suburban areas

- Plans for reducing soil erosion and stream sedimentation during construction of roads, houses, and subdivisions.
- Proposed zoning regulations to prohibit obstruction of natural or other drainage channels and filling or changing contours of flood plains in such a way as to restrict flood flows.

Agricultural resource conservation

- Initiation of shifts to more profitable agriculture.
- Development of ground water resources for supplemental irrigation, especially in urban fringe areas.
- Initiation of soil and water conservation improvements. These may include measures to prevent erosion and to rehabilitate eroded land, to provide adequate water supply, drainage, and flood control, and to improve irrigation practices.
- Restoration or development of tidal areas for agriculture.
- Plans for protecting and reserving the most productive land for agriculture.
- Plans for converting submarginal farmlands to more suitable forestry and recreational uses.

- Plans for prevention of unwise mixture of farm and nonfarm land uses.
- Initiation of a rural development program to help combine uneconomic-size farms into economic-size farms.
- Initiation of long-range and emergency measures to prevent wind erosion and duststorms. The long-range measures may include converting potential blowlands now in cultivation to grasslands.

Development of water resources

- Reservation of desirable damsites and reservoir areas.
- Reservation and protection of watersheds that are sources of municipal and irrigation waters.
- Initiation of small watershed projects under Public Law 566 and related programs to develop water resources for recreational use.
- Development of ground water resources for urban and agricultural use.
- Plans for minimizing chance of flood damage by reserving flood plains for agriculture, recreation, and other land uses not liable to great damage from floods.
- Plans for developing water retention, storage and flood control facilities.

Recreation resource plans

- Maps showing proposed parks and playgrounds.
- Creation of public parks in areas with unique public values—such as sand dunes, beaches, forested areas.
- Creation of park sites from sanitary land fills.
- Reservation of historic areas and buildings for their cultural, educational, and recreational values.
- Reservation of tracts of primitive areas for recreational uses.
- Reservation of suitable areas for small craft harbors and provision of convenient access to public waters.
- Plans for recreating drained lakes and raising the levels of others.
- Development of recreational facilities for swimming, picnicking, fishing, ice skating, skiing, baseball, and so on.

Forest resource plans

- Enlargement, development, and protection of public and private forests—to assure a sound economic base for present and proposed woodworking industries and for related supply and service employment.
- Use of forested areas for suitable recreational uses.
- Plans for an equitable system of taxation of forest land and forest growth.

Fish and wildlife resource plans

- Maps of proposed developments of marshes, swamps, and waters for fishing and wildlife uses.
- Plans for developing wildlife sanctuaries and game preserves.
- Plans for encouraging creation of private shooting preserves or hunting clubs, game and fur farms, and fish farms and hatcheries.

Mines-area resource plans

- Plans for restoring of suitable strip-mined lands for farms, grazing, or forestry.
- Plans for reclaiming strip-mined lands and abandoned quarries for recreation uses.

FULFILLING THE PLAN

To make the plan a reality it takes—

- Adoption of the plan by the county governing body—as a guide to the county's future development. Before adopting the plan this body holds public hearings on it.
- An action program directed by the county government.
- Cooperation of private developers.
- Public support.

Action Program

It's up to the county government—acting for all the people in the county—to take the lead in putting the comprehensive plan into effect.

Such a program may well include:

- Scheduling of public improvements for several years ahead, taking into account the county's financial resources.

  Usually the schedule is divided into periods of 5 or 6 years and is reviewed each year. Highest priorities are given to improvements most important to the welfare of the whole county.

  Such an improvement program makes it possible to stabilize future revenue needs and taxes, thus setting a financial basis for future development.

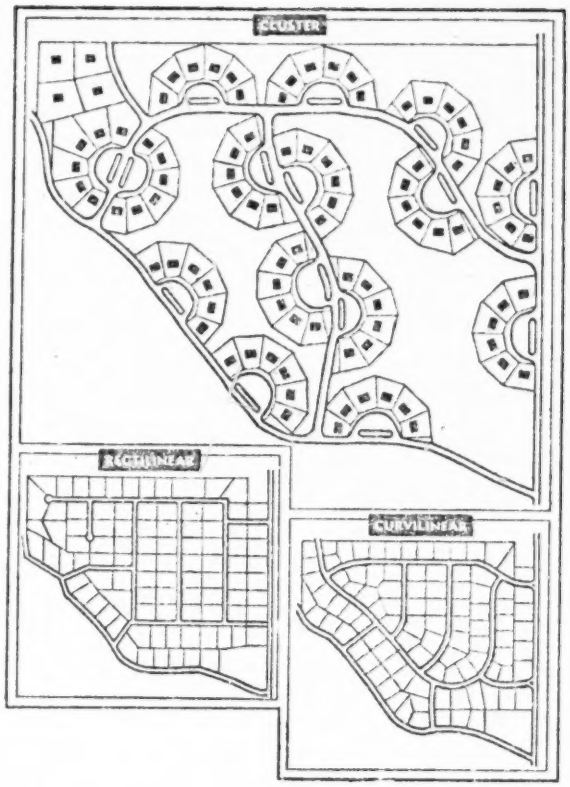
  Among public improvements scheduled are roads, schools, public buildings, parks, sewers, libraries, parking space.
- Conducting an active educational program to explain the objectives of the plan to all people in the county, in order to win their support.

  The ordinances and codes that are needed to make the plan work will limit the way individuals can use their land. They need to understand the need for these limitations and the long-term benefits to be gained from them.

  Citizen members of the planning board should help conduct this program through local meetings, newspapers, radio, television.
- Passing a good zoning ordinance. Zoning —a public regulatory power—is the chief tool used to make the comprehensive plan a reality. It is used to effect orderly development.

  The planning board draws up the zoning document, which is adopted, after public hearing, by the county governing body as an ordinance. The ordinance outlines zones for various uses, the permitted uses of these zones, and the regulations for each zone.
- Passing a sound subdivision ordinance, regulating the dividing of raw land and preparing it for construction.

  Often a subdivision ordinance requires subdividers to construct streets, curbs, and sidewalks and to install sewers, water mains, and other utilities and services so present taxpayers will not be unduly burdened.
- Passing a good building code.



Three methods of subdivision planning—conventional methods below, newer cluster zoning at top. All plans provide the same number of lots. Conventional plans have 1-acre lots. Cluster lots are reduced to three-fourths acre, leaving about 24 acres as open space for the common use of all residents.

- Passing a sanitary (or plumbing) code.

Cooperation of Private Developers

Most of the construction in a county is done by private individuals or concerns who develop property for residential, business, and industrial uses. The success of a comprehensive plan depends a great deal on how well these developers orient their projects to the overall plan.

Progressive developers will closely coordinate their projects with the schedule of public improvements.

Public Support

Public support is the sum of many actions by individuals and groups. It includes:

- Keeping informed about the planning board's progress. Studying board reports and recommendations. Passing this information on to others.
- Discussing and explaining objectives of planning at public meetings. Often planning board members are guest speakers.
- Encouraging planning board members and helping or cooperating if called on.
- Voting intelligently on measures proposed to implement the comprehensive plan.

What You Can Do

If you want a comprehensive plan for your county, here are some things you can do.

Find out if your county has a planning board or is within a regional planning area. If so, a comprehensive plan may be in the making. You can help make it a reality by attending public hearings on the plan and offering suggestions and by supporting the plan once it is adopted.

If your county has no planning board, you and your neighbors may want to get one started. Or you may want to activate a planning board that is not functioning. In either case, your first step is to become well informed about planning.

Visit planning offices in nearby communities and learn about their planning programs.

Obtain and study planning pamphlets and publications. Such educational materials can be obtained from your county agent, local planning and zoning agencies, State colleges and universities, agricultural experiment stations, and some departments of commerce.

Two national organizations in the planning field are: American Society of Planning Officials, 1313 East 60 St., Chicago, Ill. 60637. American Institute of Planners, 917 Fifteenth St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Planning board collects and studies the facts before it plans. Here board studies soil interpretation maps that show the suitability of land areas for various uses.

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